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Bcc:
Subject: Exclusive: VA chief dismisses European travel 'distraction,'¹ buzz over HHS post
Date: Fri Oct 27 2017 13:10:54 CDT
Attachments:

FYI Mr. Secretary — Donovan's piece posted a short time ago — reads very well.

Please let us know if you have any questions.

Thanks,

John U.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/10/27/exclusive-va-chief-dismisses-european-travel-distraction-buzz-over-hhs-post/804661001/>

Exclusive: VA chief dismisses European travel 'distraction,' buzz over HHS post

Donovan Slack, USA TODAY Published 1:54 p.m. ET Oct. 27, 2017 | Updated 1:58 p.m. ET Oct. 27, 2017
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WASHINGTON — VA Secretary David Shulkin says taxpayers did not foot the bill for his and his wife's sightseeing and tickets to Wimbledon during a trip to Europe that is now under review by the inspector general at the Department of Veterans Affairs. He told USA TODAY in an exclusive interview that the July trip was related to VA business, and that while the government paid for their commercial flights and hotels, his wife did not accept taxpayer-funded per diem payments or meals and that they personally paid for nighttime and weekend activities as they would have at home.

He told USA TODAY in an exclusive interview that the July trip was related to VA business, and that while the government paid for their commercial flights and hotels, his wife did not accept taxpayer-funded per diem payments or meals and that they personally paid for nighttime and weekend activities as they would have at home.

"I did not stay in my hotel room, I went out and I enjoyed the local sights with my wife. We paid for all those," he said.

The inspector general launched a probe of the trip earlier this month after The Washington Post reported the couple spent nearly half of the 10-day trip sightseeing and that taxpayers had paid for his wife to join him.

He said his wife was an official invitee and attended the conference and meetings.

"The government, through our ethics (office), approved a coach travel for her airfare," he said. "That was the only expense that was ever charged."

Shulkin attended meetings in Denmark from July 12 to 14 and a conference on veterans' issues in London from July 18 to 20.

During the four days in between, he and his wife toured two palaces, Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral in London, took a Thames River cruise and had dinner in Piccadilly Circus.

"There was no taxpayer dollars associated with it," Shulkin said.

In response to questions about the trip, Shulkin directed that his travel itineraries be posted online, including the European one. They show that unlike other Trump Cabinet secretaries who have come under fire for high-flying travel on the taxpayer dime, Shulkin has not taken charter or private flights.

"I flew U.S. commercial jets — I have not taken private jets ever in my life," he told USA TODAY. "And the only military planes I've ever used have been when it has been the president, vice president, or first lady who've been on those flights, and I've been a passenger with them, so I welcome any type of investigation."

Shulkin, who previously ran private sector hospitals, said he came to the VA "as a public service."

"My focus needs to be on fixing the issues for the VA," he said. "That's where I want my focus, and I'm going to stay away from all of this distraction that Washington tries to make you pay attention to."

Former Health and Human Services secretary Tom Price resigned last month amid withering criticism for racking up roughly \$1 million in taxpayer-funded flights on private and military aircraft since taking office in February.

Shulkin told USA TODAY that despite recent reports that he may be a candidate to replace Price at HHS, he has not interviewed for the job and is planning to stay at VA.

At the same time, Shulkin declined to rule out taking the job at some point if President Trump asked him to do it.

"I work at the pleasure of the president, and I will always do what he asks me to do," he said. "Right now, he's asked me to fix VA and that's what I want to continue to do."
